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INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 9306
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SUBJECT: CODEL PRICE MEETS WITH PRESIDENT URIBE

11. (SBU) Summary: In an August 28 meeting with Codel Price, President Uribe explained the Justice and Peace Law and reiterated his commitment to extradite former paramilitaries who violate their peace process obligations. He reviewed GOC efforts to reintegrate former paramilitaries -as well as FARC and ELN deserters- into civilian life, and discussed GOC efforts to combat the emergence of new criminal groups. Uribe recognized the GOC needs to do more to reduce labor violence, but cautioned that the failure of the U.S. Congress to approve the bilateral Free Trade Agreement would represent a serious political blow. He stressed bipartisan U.S. support for Plan Colombia remains key to forcing the FARC to negotiate, and outlined GOC attempts to engage the ELN. In response to Chairman Price's query, Uribe said he had significant differences with President Chavez but preferred to discuss them in private rather than to confront him publicly. End Summary

12. (U) U.S. Participants:

Representative David Price
Representative David Dreier
Representative Wayne Gilchrest
Representative Jeff Miller
Representative Rush Holt
Representative Adam Schiff
Representative Sam Farr
DAS Christopher McMullen
CDA Brian Nichols
POLCouns John Creamer

Colombian Participants:

President Alvaro Uribe
Ambassador Carolina Barco
Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos
Trade Minister Luis Plata
Presidential Trade Advisor Sandra Suarez
Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Adriana Mejia
National Planning Director Carolina Renteria

13. (U) House Democracy Assistance Committee Chairman David Price and his delegation called on President Uribe August 28 for nearly two hours. Rep. Price reviewed the Codel's meeting with their Colombian Congressional counterparts and asked if the GOC had considered strengthening the Colombian Congress' role in the budget process. Representative Dreier said the Codel is considering helping the Colombian Congress develop its own budget analysis capability and asked President Uribe if such a project would be useful.

14. (SBU) Uribe said in contrast with some of its neighbors, Colombian democracy has a long history of respect for independent institutions. Colombia has four independent judicial institutions -the Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Superior Judicial Council, and the Prosecutor General's Office- as well as two independent disciplinary bodies. He acknowledged the executive controls the initiative on economic legislation, but said Congress had significantly modified all three tax reform packages proposed by the GOC. Moreover, Congress recently passed a bill making it easier for Congress to censure a cabinet member, over executive branch objections. Defense Minister and former Finance Minister Santos said Colombia's tradition of macroeconomic stability stems in part from the current budget process, saying "if it's not broke, why fix it." Still, Uribe and Santos agreed it would be helpful to improve Congress' analytical capacity. They would also support congressional intern exchanges with the United States.

15. (SBU) Price recalled several opposition legislators had criticized the Justice and Peace Law for favoring reconciliation at the cost of justice, and asked for Uribe's view. Uribe replied the Justice and Peace Law breaks with past Colombian practice of giving former guerrillas a complete amnesty. Several members of the current Congress had benefited from pardons for their past guerrilla activity. In contrast, the Justice and Peace Law provide for reduced 5-8 year sentences for former paramilitaries guilty of gross human rights abuses who confess their crimes and compensate their victims. These paramilitaries are also banned from participating in politics. Uribe said the GOC would expel paramilitaries who failed to comply with these requirements from the process and would extradite them if requested. He had removed a paramilitary ringleader from the process for continuing criminal activity, and was reviewing the case of another for possible extradition to the United States.

16. (SBU) Uribe explained that the leftwing ELN and FARC reject the JPL as too harsh and demand a complete amnesty or pardon for their crimes. Many opposition legislators criticizing the Justice and Peace Law as too soft support amnesty for the two guerrilla groups. Uribe continued the GOC position believes that both the paramilitaries and leftwing guerrillas should receive equal treatment. In the event of an ELN or FARC peace process, reconciling these different views would be difficult.

17. (SBU) Uribe stressed his support for extradition, noting the GOC had extradited more than 500 criminals to the United States during his presidency. The FARC, ELN and some opposition legislators want to ban extradition, but he would oppose such a move. Uribe said he had suspended the extradition of 11 former paramilitary leaders due to their participation in the peace process, but reiterated his commitment to lift the suspensions if they violated their obligations.

18. (SBU) Representative Farr offered that the GOC effort to demobilize and reintegrate into civilian society more than 30,000 former paramilitaries is extraordinary and asked if any other countries are studying the program. Uribe welcomed visits from any countries interested in learning from Colombia's experience. Between the paramilitary process and individual desertions from the FARC and ELN, the GOC is reintegrating 46,000 former fighters into civilian life. The recidivism rate among the demobilized is only 5%, but this means more than 2000 individuals have returned to new, emerging criminal groups. These criminal bands differ from the former paramilitaries, since they have no political goals and do not combat the FARC. Still, they contribute to violence and undermine the rule of law. Uribe said the GOC continued to combat these groups, with the security forces capturing 1800 and killing 400 over the last year.

19. (SBU) Representative Dreier voiced support for the bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), saying he hopes the United State Congress approves the accord. Representative Holt explained the U.S. debate over the FTA centers largely

on issues, such as labor, human rights and environmental standards, which have nothing to do with Colombia. Uribe understood, but cautioned that if the United States Congress approves trade deals with Peru and Panama but not Colombia, the region will see it as a blow to Colombia.

¶10. (U) Uribe expected that the Colombian Congress will soon approve the environmental and labor changes sought by the United States in the FTA. The GOC also seeks to improve protection of labor union members. Murders of unionists fell over 60% between 2002 and 2006, and the GOC spent over \$10 million in 2006 to protect 1500 union leaders. The GOC recognizes it needs to do more, but the overall trend is positive.

¶11. (SBU) Representative Schiff noted the progress in Colombia, and asked what Uribe's endgame with the ELN and FARC is. Uribe said the transition of the FARC and ELN from ideological groups to narcotraffickers severely complicates GOC peace efforts. Still, the GOC has held peace talks with the weaker of the two -the ELN- for almost two years in an effort to achieve a ceasefire. The talks have floundered, because the ELN prefers to discuss abstract political issues rather than specific elements of a ceasefire. Uribe said the GOC remains open to talks, but fears it will soon have no one to talk to if the process drags on. Each month, more and more ELN fighters join the FARC.

¶12. (SBU) Uribe said GOC military pressure has succeeded in reducing the FARC from 27,000 members in 2002 to 10,000 fighters today. The FARC faces substantial military pressure but refuses to enter into serious peace talks. Uribe predicted sustained military action -coupled with vigorous counternarcotic programs- would drive the FARC to the negotiating table by 2009 or 2010. However, the GOC would need continued U.S. support under Plan Colombia to maintain this pressure. In this regard, Colombia needs continued bipartisan support in the United States.

¶13. (SBU) Representative Miller said he supports the FTA on national security grounds and asked President Uribe how he planned to handle the August 31 visit of Venezuelan President Chavez. Uribe said Venezuela and Colombia have differing ideologies, but share a 2200 kilometer border, growing commercial ties, and strong people-to-people links. Venezuela represents a key export market for Colombia, especially for labor-intensive industrial goods, and Colombia accounts for a large share of Venezuela's non-oil exports. When Chavez abandoned the Andean Community, he created difficulties for many Colombian firms. The GOC wants to persuade Venezuela to return to the regional group.

¶14. (SBU) Uribe said he tries to handle relations with Chavez in a cordial way. He recognizes his ideological differences with Chavez, but does not like to publicly challenge him. He believes it is more effective to discuss his concerns with Chavez in private. Referring to Chavez, role as a facilitator in a possible humanitarian exchange with the FARC, Uribe attributed it to his authorization of opposition Senator Piedad Cordoba to help with the FARC. Cordoba immediately went to Caracas and asked for Chavez' support.

¶15. (SBU) Uribe said Chavez subsequently called him and offered his assistance. Uribe accepted, but on two conditions. First, he said the GOC would never accept the FARC's demand for a demilitarized zone to hold talks on an exchange. Second, any FARC prisoners released as part of an accord could not return to criminal activity. Uribe said he would use Chavez' visit to reiterate these two conditions, as well as to explain past GOC efforts to engage the group. In addition, Uribe stressed the GOC had communicated to the FARC that the three U.S. hostages must be part of any humanitarian exchange.

¶16. (U) Representative Price has cleared this message.
Brownfield